

FX says overnight ratings becoming meaningless

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This image released by FX shows Mia Maestro as Nora Martinez, left, and Corey Stoll as Ephraim Goodweather in a scene from "The Strain." Leaders at the FX network are trying something new. They're no longer talking publicly about how their programs do on opening night, believing those numbers don't accurately reflect how many people see their shows. Instead, they're waiting a few days to see how many people catch up via time shifting. (AP Photo/FX, Michael Gibson)

(AP)—It's a rite nearly as old as television: the morning after a new

show premieres, network executives wait impatiently for the Nielsen company's estimate of how many people watched, and rush to report the first sign of a hit.

Leaders at the FX network are trying something new: They're no longer talking publicly about how their programs do on opening night, believing those numbers don't accurately reflect how many people see their shows. Instead, they're waiting a few days to see how many people catch up via time shifting.

Inside baseball perhaps, but also a vivid illustration of how TV viewing is changing, particularly for the scripted dramas that dominate at FX.

Less than a decade ago, the vast majority of people watched a show when a network scheduled it.

FX's "Sons of Anarchy" averaged 2.6 million viewers a week in 2006, with 2 million people watching live and another 200,000 within 24 hours, Nielsen said. Last year, each episode averaged 7.5 million viewers over a week's time, although only 3.2 million saw it "live." The rest watched on DVD, on demand, online or in FX repeats during the week.

Fully two-thirds of "Homeland" viewers on Showtime last year watched later than its first airing. The debut episode of the Fox series "Sleepy Hollow" had 10.1 million people watch live and another 10.1 million on various time shift options.

The early numbers, besides poorly representing a show's true audience, can blatantly mislead, said FX President John Landgraf. For his network's "Tyrant," overnight ratings showed that 13 percent fewer young viewers watched the second episode as watched the premiere. But when Nielsen's numbers for viewing over three full days came in, viewership was actually up 9 percent.

It gets under CBS' skin when NBC touts "America's Got Talent" as summer's most popular network show. That may be true in the overnight numbers, but CBS shows "Under the Dome" and "Extant" surpass it when time-shifted viewing is taken into account, said CBS research chief David Poltrack. Reality shows, sports and news are most commonly watched when they air.

Besides the overnight numbers, Nielsen measures how many people watch a show within three days of its first airing, and within a week. Landgraf said it's fairer to make judgments on a show after three days. FX bases its advertising sales on how many people watch a show's commercials within three days.

Landgraf said he hoped other networks follow his lead. He realizes his stance is risky. Even if FX doesn't report its overnight numbers, other networks know them and can tell the world.

"It gives our competition ... the opportunity to do mischief," he said. "Are we all going to slit each other's throats? Are we like rats in a cage, or are we going to recognize the fact that the consumer is changing the way he or she consumes our content?"

Landgraf said he waited to take his stand until after the premiere of "The Strain," which is one of the biggest initial hits in the network's history, so people wouldn't question his motives. "The Strain" did very well in the overnight numbers with 2.99 million and increased to 4.73 million within three days.

Robert Seidman, co-founder of the TV by the Numbers website, said FX's move is partly a publicity stunt. Overnight numbers still solidly represent how one program is doing against a competitor. For a cable network like FX, the value in promoting how many people watch a program over time comes when negotiating with cable or satellite

providers over how much money they will pay to carry a network.

Even if Landgraf won't talk about the overnight numbers, Seidman said people shouldn't make the mistake of thinking he isn't paying attention.

"Whatever they say, whenever they get into the office the day after a premiere, they're looking at the first shred of numbers that are available," he said.

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